**Peaceful Coexistence and Brinkmanship: Khrushchev’s and Eisenhower’s Thinking Behind Nuclear Diplomacy**

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**Dwight D. Eisenhower**

* **New Look Policy: ↑reliance on nuclear weapons**
* **Dulles’ “Massive Retaliation”**
* **Gaddis: “his aim was to avoid all wars, not simply to deter nuclear war.”[[1]](#footnote-1)**
* **military superiority not guarantee of national or international security**
* **Gaddis: Ike believed any war real potential to lead to nuclear war[[2]](#footnote-2)**
* **must convince Soviets no advantage to using nukes, not even one**
* **must make Clausewitz’s[[3]](#footnote-3) idea of absolute war seems as real as possible**
* **had to build real, operational thermonuclear weapons AND make a credible appearance of determination to use them—to point his own advisors would not doubt his determination[[4]](#footnote-4)**
* **Eisenhower: “We must now plan to fight peripheral wars on the same basis as we would fight a general war.”[[5]](#footnote-5)**
* **MASSIVE RETALIATION: logic—“to convince *all* adversaries that *any* such conflict *might* escalate to a level at which *none* could hope to prevail.”[[6]](#footnote-6)**

**Nikita Khrushchev**

**Like Eisenhower:**

* **did not want nuclear war**
* **believed nuclear weapons had uses**
* **best way to prevent nuclear war was to accumulate or APPEAR to accumulate nuclear weapons to fight a nuclear war**
* **importance of credibility: give other side no reason to doubt his resolve**
* **saw psychological power as crucial to Cold War, in other words, “numbers and capabilities of weapons were important, but not nearly as important as *the fears and hopes that existed in people’s minds*.”[[7]](#footnote-7) [emphasis added]**

**Lessons of Hungary & Suez Crisis:**

* **position of weakness could be a strength**
* **nuclear superiority, but could not influence events in Hungary**
* **Gaddis: “American nuclear superiority had been useless in this crisis: indeed, fear of the Soviet Union’s wholly *inferior* nuclear capability had convinced Eisenhower of the need to *reassure* the Russians, rather than to *deter* them.”[[8]](#footnote-8) [author’s emphasis]**
* **Eisenhower: “’In view of the serious deterioration of their positions in the satellites, might they not be tempted to resort to very extreme measures and even precipitate global war?”[[9]](#footnote-9)**
* **limits of nuclear superiority—reassessment about ability to reduce sphere of Soviet influence or its behavior → due to fear of large usage of nuclear weapons**
* **threat of nuclear usage relationship to credibility & when to threat**
* **Khrushchev saw his threat against Brit & Fr as crucial to resolving crisis → never intended to bomb Brit or Fr**
* **not restrained by public opinion unlike Eisenhower**
* **Soviet nuclear capabilities were inferior → important not to APPEAR intimidated**
* **21 Aug 1957: successful test of world’s 1st ICBM (inter-continental ballistic missile)**
* **4 Oct 1957: ICBM used to launch *Sputnik*, 1st artificial satellite to orbit Earth**
* **Khrushchev: “Of course, we tried to derive maximum political advantage from the fact that we were the first to launch our rockets into space. We wanted to exert pressure on American militarists—and also influence the minds of more reasonable politicians—so that the United States would start treating us better.”[[10]](#footnote-10)**
* **Khrushchev’s understanding of the psychological effects of military force or its threatened use**
* **nuclear version of Russian Potemkin villages**
* **Khrushchev rhetorical proclivity to emphasize Russian advancements in missile technology and “missile gap”**
* **Khrushchev utilizes missile gap & Soviet technical superiority for rest of decade and up to Cuban Missile Crisis (Oct. 1962)**
* **APPEARANCE: during entire Eisenhower Administration (ended Jan. 1961) USSR had a total of FOUR (4) fully functional ICBMs**
* **takes time for Americans to discover reality of Soviet strength—in meantime the PERCEPTION of Soviet superiority fully established in USA → reality in US: politics, military & public opinion**
* **perhaps Khrushchev expected a replay of Suez[[11]](#footnote-11)**
* **Eisenhower did not play his role—willing to rattle his own saber at times → continued build nuclear arsenal & create a nuclear stockpile for NATO**
* **Khrushchev’s nuclear bluffs resulted in US commitment place nuclear missiles in Europe from where they could easily reach Russia**
* **Khrushchev’s Nov 1958 ultimatum in Berlin Crisis**
* **23 June 1959: conversation w/ US Ambassador to Soviet Union, Averill Harriman: “’One bomb was sufficient for Bonn [capital of West Germany] and three to five to knock out France, England, Spain, and Italy.’”[[12]](#footnote-12) He then emphasized the disparity in striking power of nuclear weapons. Suddenly, he switched tactics. “’We are not aggressive…We don’t need West Berlin… If we took West Berlin, we would simply have to feed it. We would rather let you feed it.’”[[13]](#footnote-13)**
* **Harriman & Eisenhower saw performance for what it was—machinations due to insecurity**
* **Eisenhower sought to ease tensions—invited Khrushchev to visit the US**
* **include a train trip through Vandenberg Air Force Base—US’s major missile base**
* **Khrushchev continues to bluster & bluff**
* **reality US was catching up & surpassing USSR**
* **Feb. 1960: US Ambassador to UN, Henry Cabot Lodge, visited Moscow & commented that Soviets still ahead in strategic missiles → Khrushchev replied “’no we’re not; not really.’”[[14]](#footnote-14)**
* **US developing spy technology & missions into Russian air space, including U-2 flights & spy satellites**
* **by 1959: US knew Khrushchev was using “Potemkinism”[[15]](#footnote-15)**
* **21 Sept 1961: CIA reported USSR had 250-300 operational ICBM’s → only 10-25 capable of reaching the US[[16]](#footnote-16)**
* **Why did Eisenhower permit all of Khrushchev’s bluffing to go unchallenged?**
* **not entirely clear**
* **Gaddis suggests these possibilities:**
* **did not want to reveal intelligence capabilities**
* **reluctance to act w/o conclusive evidence**
* **his own self-confidence**
* **enough to assure American public they were safe w/o all details[[17]](#footnote-17)**
* **perhaps Eisenhower was satisfied w/stability that this drama created**
* **Why did Krushchev continue with his bombast and bluffing?**
* **needed to maintain confidence of his allies**
* **Ulbricht in East Germany (GDR)**
* **Mao becoming more assertive & divergent in his thinking—especially his aggressiveness**
* **assure Czechs: after Mao stated China could lose 300,000,000 but “’So what? War is war. The years will pass, and we’ll get to work producing more babies than ever before.’”[[18]](#footnote-18)**
* **Czech leader Antonin Novotny: “’We have only twelve million people…We’d lose every last soul in a war.’”**
* **What would happen if his allies saw Khrushchev as weak?**
* **a glimpse into the Sino-Soviet Split**

1. Gaddis, John Lewis. *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, p. 234 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Carl von Clausewitz: 19th century military theorist & author of *On War* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gaddis, *We Now Know*, p. 234 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, p. 235. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid, p. 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid, p. 241. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid, p.242. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid, p. 244. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid, p. 246. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid, p. 247 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid, p. 248 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid, p. 249 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)